

Vietnam's Central Coast has it all

→ Danang, Asia's rapidly-emerging golf destination, has designs by the Great White Shark, Monty and Faldo

GREG Norman, Colin Montgomerie and Nick Faldo have much in common. They are three greats of the game who reached No. 1 or No. 2 in the world rankings, fierce competitors, and they have since turned their attention to golf-course design and other business pursuits.

Norman, who is also called the Great White Shark, is a winner of 91 pro tournaments and two British Opens. He has designed more than 80 courses worldwide. Monty, with 41 victories but no majors, was eight times winner of the European Order of Merit and has his name on 15 courses in play or being built. Faldo, knighted in 2009, had 40 professional wins, including six majors in a stellar 30-year career that included 98 weeks as the world's top player.

Now there's another link: The three icons are teeing off alongside each other on Vietnam's Central Coast, based in the city of Danang, Asia's rapidly-emerging, world-class golf destination.

Monty's eponymous Montgomerie Links, which he officially opened in April 2010, is right next door to the Norman-designed The Dunes at the Danang Golf Club, that unofficially opened for play at the same time. Meanwhile, Laguna Lang Co, between Danang and the former imperial city of Hue, was officially opened in mid-March by the six-time Major-winner himself.

The three courses are all members of Golf Coast Vietnam (www.golfcoastvietnam.com), a new marketing programme that aims to bring Danang to the attention of golfers throughout the Asia-Pacific, Europe and North America.

Good morning,



by PAUL MYERS

“There's nothing in Asia quite like it. It's setting a new standard for the type of course that will be built throughout Asia in the future.”

— HARLEY KRUSE

Vietnam! And *chao buoi sang* to the world's newest golf destination. With a population of almost a million and located halfway between Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, Danang – Vietnam's third-largest city – has quickly become the country's golf focus, right where US Marines first landed in 1965 and set up base on the sand dunes of China Beach.

It took another 45 years for a golf ball to be hit there competitively, but all that duneland didn't go unnoticed. Montgomerie Links and The Dunes are on a sweep of sand stretching along the coast for more than 25km, from Danang to a Unesco World Heritage site – the ancient city of Hoi An.

Five-star resorts, including the Hyatt Regency Danang and the exquisite Ocean Villas complex Danang, are opening apace.

A fourth unit, Ba Na Hills, located in the Danang hinterland and bearing the stamp of former world No. 1 Luke Donald, is being built by IMG. Its opening date is uncertain, but is rumoured to be in 2014.

Reminiscent of Melbourne's sandbelt and the coasts of Scotland, Greg Norman's former designer, Australian Harley Kruse – who managed the Danang Golf Club construction – says it's rare to find such ideal land for golf courses in Asia. Not that players are complaining, or that the two adjoining courses replicate each other.

Far from it. Whereas Monty went the manicured, resort-style route, with minimal waste areas and little visible sand, the Shark opted to leave the sand dunes as they were, creating a starker but truer links feel.

“It's classic links ground – Royal Melbourne meets China Beach,” Kruse says of The Dunes. “There's nothing in Asia quite like it. It's setting a new standard for the type of course that will be built throughout Asia in the future.”

This is no idle claim. Last year, the course was named the best new layout in Vietnam.

Its developer, the VinaCapital Group – Vietnam's leading investment-funds manager – has plans for an adjoining



A golfer blasts out of the bunker at Hole 14 of the Montgomerie Links



A scenic view at the Banyan Tree

course in a wetland area, while the accompanying Danang Beach Resort provides all the comfort any discerning golfer would want.

Kruse says the Danang GC layout appeals to traditionalists and links aficionados. “It's in the Alister MacKenzie philosophy. The club might not sell a lot of balls in the pro shop, because even if you stray off the fairways, you'll find your ball,” he explains.

True. There's a lot of sand on the 7,190-yard layout from the Shark tees (6,660 yards from the black tees and 6,210 yards from the whites) and it looks intimidating, but notwithstanding ubiquitous casuarina pines that are native to the area, ground cover is sparse. As Kruse says, you can play out of most situations.

In typical Norman style, bunkering features prominently and there are few blind tee shots. Numerous holes have sand edging along most of the fairway, often blending into shaped bunkers that guard heavily-undulating greens. Fairways are firm and most holes also have grassed run-out areas feeding off the greens. Miss the right landing area and you face a steep breaking putt or an awkward chip or putt from the fringe.

The signature hole is the 16th, a 148-yard par-3 that plays up to China Beach. From the tee, the Cham Islands appear in the distance, 10 miles or so straight ahead. You can hear, but can't see, the pounding surf until you reach the green. A pillbox from French colonial days stands sentry between the sharply-sloping green

and the 17th tee. There are many other standouts: The 219-yard par-3 second, heavily-bunkered at right; the long, 630-yard par-5 10th, with a right then left dogleg fairway cut between high dunes that plays to mountains in the distance; the delectable risk-and-reward downhill 319-yard par-4 14th that may prompt the foolhardy or big hitters – or both – to go for the green; and the stunning, visually intimidating 479-yard par-4 18th, a classic testing finishing-hole on which par is a fine result.

Under the watchful eye of former Australian tour pro Jon Tomlinson, and designed by Colin Montgomerie with IMG, Monty Links has a whole different feel.

The developer, IndoChina Land, is the real estate division of IndoChina Capital, which owns upmarket local resorts the Nam Hai and the Hyatt Regency.

The 7,063-yard layout off the back (Monty) tees is a great test for low markers.

At 6,602 yards off the blue tees and 5,766 yards off the whites, it is eminently playable for higher handicappers. Man-made water on two-thirds of the holes makes it more of a resort-style layout than a true links course. Monty himself acknowledges this, saying a “links-style philosophy” was behind the design strategy.

For visual impact and presentation, Montgomerie Links is as good as anything in Southeast Asia, and in 2011 was named Vietnam's best course for the second year in a row.

Its modern clubhouse overlooking the 18th hole and a 20-bay crescent moon-shaped covered practice facility should be models for all new course developments.

Among the standout holes are the tiny 118-yard over-water par-3 5th with a round bunker immediately between the water and the pin; the 487-yard par-5 6th, which – although short – has an elevated waterside green that requires a precise approach; the signature 527-yard par-5 12th hole towards the clubhouse; the Index 1 455-yard par 4 13th with a tough uphill approach shot to a tiny green; and the beautiful downhill 220-yard par-3 14th to a water-guarded green.

Monty nominates the tee shot on the 12th as having “as good a view from the tee as anywhere” and the second shot on 13 as his personal favourites.

“It's playing magnificently well, with firm fairways and good bunkering,” he said after shooting a course record 68 on his exhibition-round first outing three years ago. “It's got championship possibility. It would be great if the European tour could include Vietnam in the schedule.”

Sir Nick Faldo's Laguna Lang Co course offers a different experience. The development, that includes resort facilities, is the 26th in Faldo's blossoming course-design portfolio. It meanders through natural jungle, wetlands and rice paddies to the beach. Developed by Banyan Tree Hotels and Resorts, which operates Laguna Phuket in Thailand and Laguna Bintan in Indonesia, Laguna Lang Co is a perfect adjunct to Montgomerie Links and the Danang Golf Club.

There are numerous standout holes,

of which the par-3 11th, that plays beside the mountain to a backdrop of huge boulders, is Faldo's favourite.

“The site has what we're always looking for,” he says. “If you can create different environments for golfers throughout the round, that's the ‘in’ thing now – you want a different feel, requiring different shots. I think this course is going to hold up against better courses in the region – and maybe even the world.”

Which course is the best? That's impossible to pick. Golf purists from traditional golf countries enjoy the Danang Golf Club's sand-dune environment. Asian and American golfers favour the more manicured look and feel of Montgomerie Links. Laguna Lang Co sits somewhere in between, with a mountain backdrop that provides an amphitheatre feel and a sense of being completely away from it all – as you are in this idyllic part of Vietnam.

One certainty is that Vietnam's Central Coast is cementing a newly-won reputation as Asia's hottest new golf-tourism destination. Immediately after the Laguna Lang Co opening, Dragonair commenced direct flights to Danang from Hong Kong, supplementing SilkAir services from Singapore. AirAsia, however, is discontinuing its direct service from Kuala Lumpur in June, as it wants to commit aircraft to new routes. **FocusM**

For more information about Danang's golf courses and golf packages, visit www.golfcoastvietnam.com

Champion of Champions crowned at Bukit Jawi

WHEN it comes to longevity and an unrivalled history of tradition and exclusivity in golf tournaments, it has to be the Golf Malaysia Champion of Champions championship that just completed its 27th edition at the Bukit Jawi Golf Resort in Penang.

Gaining entry to the tournament involves first outplaying the top golfers in their home club. Once the win is secured, would-be Champions can join other club champions from throughout Malaysia and Singapore in the “Masters of Malaysia”, to vie against top amateurs for bragging rights and the honour of donning the Green Jacket.

Defending champions don't often get the chance to return, as club championships are highly-competitive affairs. However, two defending champions – A Mizan Silai in the men's category representing the Kuala Kubu Baru Golf and Country Club, and Thomas Liew, in the Seniors, representing the Tropicana Golf and Country Club – were back for this year's event. The 2012 women's champion, Asha Laksme, who represented the Johor Golf & Country Club, was not in the line-up, as her commitments in the US did not permit her return. There were also many new faces in the 2013 line-up, all eager to don the Green Jacket and mirror the professionals at The Masters in Augusta that was running the same weekend.

Winners there were, by tournament's end, on both sides of the world and credit must be given to the Senior Champion, Thomas Liew (156), who defended his title against Calvin Wong Chin Tong (205) of the Johor Golf & Country Club. Liew held the lead after the first round.

The Men's affair was as close as it could be with Fong Seng Tat (152) of Kelab Rekreasi Tentera Udara winning by the slimmest of margins over Faizul Hafiz Zulkipili (153) of the Royal Pahang Golf Club and three-time past champion Lee Ka Tung (153) of the Sibul Golf Club. The new women's champion hails from Kelab Golf Negara Subang. Irene Hong (155) ably put together a two-round score that saw her comfortably stifle the challenge from her nearest rival, Khairun Hanisah (162) of the Kota Permai Golf & Country Club.

Men's champion Fong plays a five handicap. He was participating in his second Champions championship after having not fared so well at the 2012 tournament at A'Famosa in Melaka. “Bukit Jawi was in good condition despite overnight rain prior to

the first round,” Fong says. “It was playing extremely long and the undulating greens were a challenge. My consistency off the tee was definitely an advantage, as the golf course put a lot of emphasis on being able to hit it long while keeping it in the fairway. There's certainly extra motivation to perform well and make my club proud, as it's an honour representing them at this prestigious amateur tournament.”

Liew, handicap three, was a well-known figure for the crowd. He found the Hill Course very long and tough. “It's not easy to play when you're not familiar with the course, but overall it is a beautiful and a very good golf course,” says Liew. “In the first round, I didn't perform because I was not familiar with the wet condition of the terrain. Whereas in the second round I played better, because I had adapted to the conditions.”

Trailing first-round leader Wong, he felt the turning-point in the game came in the second round, on the 17th hole. “The current leader slipped a little, and I took the opportunity to do well,” he says.

Hong, handicap four, was thrilled with her win and was especially happy as she got to share it with her husband, who drove her to the tournament and was there for encouragement throughout.

Hong was the champion in 2005 at the Pulau Springs Resort when she represented the Saujana Golf and Country Club, and has been a participant on other occasions; so she was prepared for the pressure. She found the course at Bukit Jawi very challenging. “The greens were very undulating and one had to putt very carefully. Overall, the course was well-maintained,” she says.

“I played quite well for the two rounds, except on the first day I drove a good shot at the 18th hole but couldn't find my ball. My putting in the first round was not good, as I had yet to get used to the speed of the greens; but on the second day I played much better, as I was hitting the ball quite solidly.”

“All pressure lifted from me when I birdied the first two holes [11th and 12th] to take the lead from my opponent. I gained confidence and played great golf after that.”

The prizes were presented by Aung Ching Ching, sales and marketing manager of Berjaya Air, Khor Chen Yee, general manager of the Bukit Jawi Golf Resort and Khor Kim Tong, managing director of the Bukit Jawi Golf Resort. **FocusM**

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From left: Fong, Liew and Hong